

THE IRONY AND OBSESSIONS OF CIORAN'S PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: The paper deals with some of the main characteristics of Cioran's philosophical work and suggests a clear point of view on the so-called pessimistic attitude on life the writer is believed to have constructed. Moreover, the problem of religion is brought forward and we analyse the degree to which Cioran may be called an atheist. His inner experience of unexpected amplitude has nourished texts which are no longer the image of the author, but become an objective expression of the mindset that generated them. Thus, the paper tries to identify and stress out the manner in which the philosopher from Răşinari understood and tackled life.

Keywords: philosophy, pessimistic, atheist, irony, scepticism

He ridiculed death and God by playing with the concepts, twisting them, separating them, compelling them to shocking linguistic and logical angles which have, however, represented the very zest and everlasting originality of his work. Taking his obsessions to new limits, he crossed over norms and useless fixations. Not only did he aspire towards it, but he also witnessed his "failure" throughout his entire life – a person's failure in the system, a failure that takes the person out of the system. His entire work appears as a duty, as an immense and heavy duty which he had, not only to the world, but also to himself – a duty to the man that Cioran was. In his first book, *Pe culmile disperării* [On the Heights of Despair], we can find the following quote: "if the difference between the man and the animal is the fact that the animal cannot be but an animal, whereas the man can be *unhuman*, which is something other than himself – in this case I am unhuman" (4, p. 107). This stands as a brief self-description, but not in the least irrelevant; because, what else did Cioran's writing manage to turn him into if not a non-human, a different kind of human, a different kind of existing in this world? An existence which is not an existence; a becoming which is not a becoming; a failure which is not a failure; and still, there is something meant to embody all this puzzlement and this is *Cioran*. He identified himself with philosophy as a fragment, with religiousness as denial of the divine, with love as despair and struggle and, last but not least, with existence as scarcity.

The writing – lyrically acknowledged – is not the result of an exaggerated sentimentalism or of an overly feminine nostalgia full of inversions and structures or words used with the sole purpose of shocking the audience; nor is it the result of a twisted desire for aesthetic refinement. Cioran's entire work is nothing but *feeling*; supreme and authentic feeling. The verb is exhilarating, instinctual, and masculine and it generates emotions free of any sentimental contextualizing. The reader feels hit as if by an obvious denial of everything that is bland, mushy and lacking in consistency. As an immediate result of a unique

experience, the phrase becomes an incantation as it is perceived as total objectification of a subjective process. “My experiences became books, as if they had written themselves” (2, p.25) – states the philosopher once. And this cannot be translated except through the necessary objectification of experience. The subjectivity of Cioran’s writing was called a subjectivity “almost impossible, one that consumes the personal self [...], a demonic one” (Gerd Bergfleth). Truly, this demonic nature determines without the shadow of a doubt not only the *self* or the *conscience*, but also “the positions of his own subjectivity”. This inner existence, of an unsuspected magnitude, is able to create such work that, in the moment of its birth, it ceases to belong to its author, its creator, and instead it becomes an objective expression of the states of mind that had generated it. “The writing”, noted down the philosopher from Răşinari, “is only valuable when it objectifies a feeling, because beyond the expression there is life, and beyond the form there is content. I would like to write something in blood and I would like to do that without the thought of any poetic effect, but in the practical and material sense of the word” (1, p. 19).

Emil Cioran is able to see beyond this world, beyond religion and beyond any philosophy. He suggests a new and challenging perspective on what is given, without limiting himself to immediate plans, but proceeding towards much more profound perceptions, doubled by interpretations which alter the phenomenon significantly. There is no doubt regarding Cioran’s religiousness. Unequivocally, Cioran was a religious man, but his religiousness manifested itself in a negatively-upward trend (if I may use such a concept). His entire mysticism is subordinated to a terrible fear of getting lost *in* the divine and of obliterating the human being with all their qualities. Cioran does not deny the existence of God, but the existence *within* God. He discredits any form of transcendental absolute in the desire of the “earth” of living to the fullest; of an immediate and sheer biological elation. “There are moments when the agony of a worm seems to me a more certain reassurance than all the skies. No matter how much the saints would want to, they cannot unearth me to such a length so that I lose the memory of the earth. And not only once, did this memory crush the heavenly melancholy” (3, p. 81).

Cioran cannot see an incompatibility between the human being and the divine one, but he does possess the intuition (to what extent is it a happy one, I do not know) of the annihilation and “wearing off” of vitality and biological opportunities which occur when man declares his full availability towards God. “Drifting” among the heavenly melancholy is in this situation a sort of dissipation, an oriental fusion with the divine; the former is no longer capable of a valid control of his being’s motivations, thus, annihilating even the last categories specific to human nature. It is true that Cioran might have wrongly interpreted the dogma of the Orthodox tradition; therefore, making inaccurate analogies and irrelevant judgements from this perspective. However, I will leave this aspect of the discussion for the theologians to decide and I will draw the attention on the fact that I do not attempt at determining the truth in the work of the Răşinari born philosopher, but at briefly interpreting some of his trains of thought.

Perhaps many people consider Emil Cioran to be a Godless writer, or a writer who lacks any divine support. But here I come to argue all that: he is more impregnated with the divine than many of us will ever be! On the reversed scale which I proposed in the analysis of Cioran’s work, which I continuously support, God plays an important and (without being afraid of false affirmations) decisive role in the philosopher’s life. I do not claim that Cioran was an unfathomable Christian, but the bond which he had with Christianity and the interest which he displayed towards it make me recognize in the writer a mystic in the true sense of

the word. If he had thought religion to be an irrelevant phenomenon lacking in consistency, then certainly Cioran would have behaved like any other Atheist and he wouldn't have given it any importance or consideration. But when the philosopher is crying out the name of divinity from the depth of his being with unbearable suffering and when holiness becomes an obsession for him, then you can't but accept the writer's *belief* in Orthodoxy, and in religion in general; for, only so profound belief would have been able to create a book as *Lacrimi și sfinți* [Tears and Saints] and only from the uncertainty such belief poses was it possible for someone so strong to be born; someone so powerful to be able to kill God but to also resurrect Him. Emil Cioran states at some point that "between the passion for ecstasy and the horror of the void the entire mysticism revolves" (3, p. 91); therefore, what else was Cioran's relationship with God but a "reversed" mysticism in which the author becomes in his turn a ...saint?! It may seem like a far-fetched statement, I admit, but I will try to explain. He experienced both extremes, but he shifted their order and determinations: at sense level, everything is related to experience, last and necessary; he also felt the horror of the void which divinity suggests in the absence of any natural and instinctive perceptions. And here's why, in his own way, Cioran is also a saint and, as much as he would have objected to this distinction, it must be acknowledged that he considered his whole life, the "failure" of his life, to be an ascendance, but one which was lived on a different level, one which had a completely different set of perception criteria and experiences. And, similar to the saints he laments, Cioran's sincerity is limitless and it ends up determining the entire repertoire of his mystical "delirium".

As a result of this limitless sincerity, the philosopher goes beyond a so-called false intellectual prudence, he "toys" with prejudice, subjecting them to direct confrontation, as far as ideas are concerned, with an acute and painful perception of reality. In a letter addressed to Bucur Tincu, Cioran was confessing: "I have undoubtedly given up any sentimental philosophy, any senseless and scattered preoccupations which only lead to complaining about life and to pathetic exclamations. "Empty" things start to possess a bright breath of life if you continuously preoccupy yourself with them" (1, p.24). Cioran's aphorisms have the role of deconstructing some mentalities and stale unproductive conceptions, which immediately result in a naked presentation; a surrender of everything is fake and stereotypical in the human nature. "It is great", the author was saying, "to witness the imbecile silence of the people who *are learning*, instead of living philosophy [...]" (1, p. 30). It can be felt in this attitude, more or less aware, an almost messianic embracing of the act of writing, of the condition of prophet of failure, as this might determine a great deal of effort, of breaking, of bursting, or of intellectual compromise.

Carmen Ligia Radulescu was stating in her book, *Emil Cioran – conștiința ca fatalitate* that the philosopher "created for our century an unparalleled *synthesis between scepticism and mysticism*" (p. 78). However, there is nothing more wrong than this opinion. First of all, Cioran was never a sceptic nor could he have been one, in the literal sense of the word. Secondly, the mysticism that he proposed to his conscience is completely real and it is not transformed into other ways of existence. The author of such books as *Pe culmile disperării*, *Lacrimi și sfinți* or *Tratat de descompunere*, cannot be defined as a sceptic because this would imply indifference and a certain distance towards a particular phenomenon. A sceptic is a distant person who analyses things in a strict and objective manner. Nonetheless, Cioran's doubt maintains the passion of a "reversed" pessimism and the subjective analysis lived as a necessary experience. The philosopher himself confessed during an interview in the latter part of his life: "If I consider my temperament, I am not [...] a true sceptic [...]. I, for

one thing, have doubted *passionately*, which is something no sceptic does. A sceptic is someone who distances themselves from their ideas and from what they really are. A sceptic doubts everything, but they are sure of themselves. They control themselves. This is not my case” (*Convorbiri...*, p.116).

To be able to assert about a man that he is marked by the genius of scepticism, you must have the indisputable argument of a profound separation of the doubt-generating reality. Thus, Cioran’s verb can be defined in any other way but this; it represents enthusiasm taken to the extreme and passion which identifies the man with the phenomenon. We could, however, conclude, if we had to, that Cioran is a pseudo-sceptic; as his existence (more or less mystical) is the one generating doubt, but the doubt is accepted and transformed into vitalizing irony.

The philosopher from Rasinari accepts, as I was saying earlier, that his writing possesses a messianic nature and he also debunks the statements which were defining him as “a sceptic on duty for a world in decline” (Petre Tutea). There is a philosophical messianic message in Cioran’s writing; a historical messianic message and, last but not least, a religious one with all the determination it implies. This is why Cioran’s life seems almost Christ-like as the philosopher participates with all his being to becoming onto pain, to crucifying his obsessions and his ecstasy on a Golgotha of despair. Thus, this also becomes the cause of his work being unique; the cause of the messianic message which he sent unaware.

It is often stated that Emil Cioran’s work is profoundly pessimistic; a pessimism that is consuming and dematerializing. My opinion, however, is that if the person who is reading a book written by Cioran submerges into a melancholic and devitalizing pessimism, then that person has not really read Cioran. Perhaps they have leafed through some pages, read some ideas which they mirrored their own experiences into, their own projections on an existence which is impossible to transcend. The verbs that Cioran uses cannot be anything other than invigorating and provocative, since they are received by the true reader not only as a “cultural discomfort, but also as an existential one” (*Convorbiri...*, p.110). The philosopher himself declared at some point: “Even though I have a very dark opinion about life, I have always been interested in living. This passion of mine has been so great, that it became a denial of life because I did not possess the necessary means of quenching my yearning for living.” (*Ibidem*, p. 34). Therefore, here is the significance of this so-called pessimism: an enhancement of experience in all the forms it existed throughout the philosopher’s life. Petre Tutea explains the presence of such pessimism in the philosopher’s writing as a wish to obtain aesthetical composure. However, if I may, I believe that such judgement is erroneous because the process of writing has, for Cioran, above all, a confessional feature; it is a confession to himself which does not intend to have an aesthetical value. The importance of the authenticity which can be drawn from these confessions justifies a real and instinctive discomfort of a man who embraced his marginal existence; a transformation at the periphery, I could say; at the periphery of philosophy, of the world, of himself.

When talking about his work, the author of *Tratatul de descompunere* was confessing that “everywhere [in books] there is the same emotion of the being [...]. It is the reaction of a leper, a spiritual leper, who can no longer belong to humanity, therefore a feeling of utter loneliness arises” (*Convorbiri...*, p. 107). It can be noticed here, beyond an image of intellectual vanity, self-assuredness as sole existence, meant to be a complete and productive “failure”.

Cioran’s themes do not bring anything new. He admits that his entire creation is based on two main ideas: death and the uselessness of life. However, what is indeed novel and provocative

is the intensity of the experience. He practices philosophy as a fragment precisely because it is written in moments of intense consumption, in the moments of painful immersion into consciousness, of self-abandonment in the vastness of anxiety. This is why the philosopher informs us that no matter how flawed his books might be, they have the great advantage of not being “forged”; as he never intended to produce philosophy that is quiet and which lacks the consistency of living. He admired those people who, even if they belonged to an inferior social class, knew how to *exist*, in the sense that Cioran assigned to the word, thus possessing the intuition of the ultimate truths.

It cannot be said that Cioran detested education or the idea of culture; he simply did not grant them an important role as far as the process of forming the personality was concerned. “To brag that you read more books than another person”, he said, “is nothing but arrogance, but to brag that you understand more than another person means to be in the right place. Any person who is ambitious and intelligent [...] is able to understand and to feel reality, with every bit of specific and irrational matter, far beyond the status of common intelligence” (*Cioran – 12 scrisori...*, p. 34). Thus, culture must be doubled and made whole by authentic feelings and by honest thinking, short of the rigours of calculated education. Moreover, any phenomenon must be experimented in such way that it allows life itself to blend with it and even to be identified with the existence of the person who is observing it.

For Cioran, writing was equal to life. He diminished his obsessions through the final act of writing, which manifested itself as resolution and redemption. His entire work was also the therapy which attempted to cure those obsessive bouts that haunted him his whole life. The philosopher himself admits: “I wrote in order to free myself of a burden on my soul or in order to make this burden a little more bearable” (6, p.111). Cioran tries to elude reality through thinking and he succeeds in doing so. To him, the books he had written were a remedy against a way of perceiving reality and his feelings of anger and hopelessness that was too lucid. The intensity with which he took them in and the experience pushed to the extreme determines us to understand Cioran’s work as an instinctual phenomenon which burst out from a spirit tortured by contradictory feelings. “The writing”, the philosopher from Răşinari admitted, “no matter how little it meant, helped me to survive from year to year, because the obsessions which I laid down on paper are thus left half weaker and out-dated. I am sure that, if I had blacked the paper, I would have long ago killed myself. Writing is a tremendous relief” (6, p. 16). The action of writing down all sorts of feelings becomes, therefore, a blessing, a redemption of the sin of feeling and of having a conscience. It is as if Cioran is tormented by a demon and so assumes the last act of creation, of transforming into writing all his melancholy, his restlessness and his anxiety. And this stands as irrefutable proof of writing as a way of life, as an act of identity, not a mere jotting down of a way in which the author perceives reality. At some point, writing a book will become a necessary expression, similar to a ritual of transformation which carries with it an almost ontological obligation of performance. In the centre of this ritual, the writer has a minimum responsibility, but only to himself, as he is the sole participant and beneficiary of the rite. This style is reduced as a last resort to an exorcism of the philosopher’s being of all his obsessions and his spiritual unlimitations: “I don’t believe in the reader, I write for myself; I write so I can free myself of the obsessions and all the tensions, nothing more” (2, p. 20). It is true that he does not believe in the reader, he doesn’t write for this imaginary being; but he does believe in the book and its educational vocation. As far as Cioran is concerned, a book “must truly be an affliction, it must unsettle the reader’s life one way or another” (2, p. 20). Thus, if the act of reading doesn’t bring with itself the slightest change in the reader’s being, then it has only been a

waste of time, without any existential benefit for the one using it. And the book which determines such an attitude is, therefore, a “failed book”. Oftentimes defined as a writer of contradictions, Emil Cioran remains totally constant, at least in his attitude towards creation, towards the supreme argument for a life as failure, for a failure as becoming.

The young man who came down from Coasta Boacii didn’t “programme” his existence, didn’t follow or desire a specific line of education, nor did he believe in the cold culture of libraries. Cioran is the *Romanian* philosopher by excellence. His philosophy drew its consistency from the irony specific to the rural man from Ardeal when faced with things he understands but is unable to control. “The honesty” with which he sends insults towards the divinity sounds more like a typical Romanian cursing; and the “failure” which the author accepts as being a part of himself is nothing other than the classic existence of the Romanian genius. With a language of infinite subtlety, with a delicacy of the verb which “earned all the contradictions of the contentious spirit”, Cioran approaches various categories only to doubt them, in the way only he knows how. “Cioran paints black on black”, the critic Eugen Simion was saying, “and he knows how to reveal, from these combinations, a bright landscape of desolation” (7, p. 125).

If we were to observe the personality of the Răşinari-born philosopher in the context of the inter-war period, we can easily notice not so much as a discrepancy, but a uniqueness of the existence, an inimitable singularity. Noica has his own style, Eliade possesses ambition and fierceness, Țuțea is renowned for innocent Orthodoxy of the placid Romanian; Cioran, however, has nothing from all of these, or maybe he has it all, or a little of each. One thing is certain, the way Constantin Tacou said: “one can become an *Eliade*, but one cannot become a *Cioran*” (1, p.121). You can imitate the historian of religions, or, at least, you can become his disciple, “if you possess intelligence and culture”; but the philosopher of despair and of melancholy “is inimitable, even though everybody who reads his work find themselves, without fail, in his books”. He doesn’t bring theories forth, although it seems like he does; he lives to the fullest and forces his readers to do the same. He says that something is “upside down” but still valid for the world to reason inside it. And still, he cannot be considered a master.

In *Tratatul de descompunere* [Treaty of Decomposition], Cioran himself can sense this; can feel that his existence is accepted onto forever solitude. By making the eulogy of the ancient Greeks’ “dog”, Diogenes, the writer was, in fact, writing his own eulogy, without realizing that the attitude of one is the same as the attitude of the other; that the existence of the great Greek philosopher was transferred at a modern scale on Coasta Boacii and the streets of Sibiu, and later on *rue de l’Odeon*. And if Eliade was Cioran’s counterpart, then Socrates, too, becomes the *master* offering moral support to Diogenes. Both one and the other, Emil Cioran and Diogenes of Sinope, made the man the centre of their reflection. And, the same as for the Greek philosopher, Cioran tried to present the human being naked of any moral or metaphysical falsity; to paint it in as deep and repulsive colours as possible. His work “proposes nothing; the source of his attitude and cynicism is determined by a testicular horror before the ridiculousness of being human” (5, p. 103) and by a limitless desire of living to the fullest the failure which identified with his very existence.

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